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ABSTRACT

Advertising research has indicated that a high degree of sexism toward women occurs in magazine and television advertising. However, the design of such marketing studies is different from the designs typically used in most psychological research. An experimental approach was used for a study in which 137 college students rated 10 control and 10 "sexist" target magazine advertisements for appeal and perceived sexism and completed the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS). Females found target ads to be more sexist than males, although both sexes rated target ads as much more sexist than control ads. There were no sex differences in ratings of the appeal of control ads. Females rated target ads as less appealing than control ads. High sexism ratings of the target ads were associated with low appeal ratings. Additionally, females displayed more liberal attitudes on the AWS than did males. The findings suggest that social desirability factors may have influenced ratings on the AWS and sexism scale, but not the appeal ratings. (Author/JAC)

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Perception of Women in Magazine Advertising

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PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN MAGAZINE ADVERTISING

Research published in the advertising and marketing literature suggests that a high degree of "sexism" toward women exists in magazine and television advertising, that is, that women tend to be portrayed either in a degrading or demeaning fashion, or in sex-role stereotypic behaviors (Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Culley & Bennett, 1976; Peterson & Kerin, 1977; Venkatesan & Losco, 1975; Wagner & Banos, 1973). Such research also suggests that males and females react to sex in advertising differently, males generally judging sexual advertising more favorably than females (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Morrison & Sherman, 1972; Peterson & Kerin, 1977; Wise, King, & Merenski, 1974).

Unfortunately, though perhaps understandably, the design of many of the advertising and marketing studies is different from the designs typically employed in most psychological research. Advertising and marketing research on the depiction of women in advertising relies primarily on the content analysis of advertisements. Experimental and correlational designs are not frequently employed, and when used are typically concerned with consumer attitudes and behaviors, such as product recall (e.g. Alexander & Judd, 1978; Steadman, 1969). Research reported outside the advertising and marketing domain has been scant, but has also primarily adopted the content analysis approach (Mant & Darroch, 1975; Pesch, Knill, Pursey, Gilpin, & Perloff, 1981; Prather & Fidell, 1975; Seidenberg, 1974; Stemple & Tyler, 1974).

In the present study, an experimental approach was adopted. The type of magazine advertisement subjects viewed was manipulated: target ads were selected that depicted women as sex objects, while control ads depicted men and women interacting as equals. Both types of ads were rated by male and female subjects for appeal and for the degree of sexism portrayed in the ads.

Since the attitudes of subjects toward the role of women in contemporary society might plausibly influence target and control ad ratings, the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) was also administered to all subjects.

METHOD

A panel of three "expert" raters (two female sociologists specializing in women's issues and one male social psychologist) selected 10 control and 10 "sexist" target ads from among 40 magazine advertisements (interrater reliability = 0.95). Sexism was defined for the raters as "The portrayal of women as inferior to or dominated by men via situations in which females are degraded, demeaned, sexually or otherwise exploited, or portrayed as having less important capacities and/or functions than men". Control ads did not exploit women or portray them as sex objects, but did portray males and females interacting as equals. All ads were drawn from popular magazines, including Cosmopolitan, Glamour, Ms, Newsweek, Playboy, Psychology Today, Saturday Review, Time, and Vogue.

A total of 137 introductory psychology students (55 males, 82 females) participated in the study for course credit. Subjects

ranged in age from 18 to 47 years, with a median age of 20, and were primarily (75%) freshmen and sophomores. In groups of approximately 25-35, subjects viewed a randomized sequence of the 20 ads, rating each ad on a 5-point like-dislike scale (higher scores reflecting greater appeal). Subjects were then shown the 20 ads again, but in a different random order, rating each ad on a 5-point "sexism" scale (higher scores indicating greater sexism). Sexism was defined for subjects in the same way as for the raters.

After rating all ads on both scales, all subjects completed the 25-item Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence, et al., 1973). On this instrument, high scores indicate conservative or traditional attitudes toward women, while low scores indicate more liberal attitudes.

RESULTS

Appeal Scale

Means and standard deviations for the appeal ratings of target and control ads as a function of subject gender are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Appeal scale ratings were analysed using a two-way fixed-effects analysis of variance (ANOVA). Significant main effects were found for subject gender [$F(1,135) = 9.82$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .06$] and for the type of advertisement shown [$F(1,135) = 113.20$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .20$]. The interaction of the two main effects was also significant [$F(1,135) = 57.21$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .10$]. Simple effects follow-up tests (Winer, 1971) revealed that the differences in appeal ratings

between males and females for the control ads was not significant [$F(1,135) = 3.75$, $p > .05$], but for target ads was significant [$F(1,135) = 50.19$, $p < .001$]. Similarly, the differences in appeal ratings between target and control ads was not significant for males [$F(1,135) = 3.59$, $p > .05$], but was significant for females [$F(1,135) = 210.78$, $p < .001$].

Sexism Scale

Means and standard deviations for the sexism ratings of target and control ads as a function of subject gender are also given in Table 1.

A two-way fixed-effects ANOVA was conducted on the sexism scale ratings. As with the appeal scale results, significant main effects were found for both subject gender [$F(1,135) = 4.80$, $p < .05$, $\omega^2 = .03$] and for the type of advertisement shown [$F(1,135) = 1234.90$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .72$]. The interaction of the two main effects was also significant [$F(1,135) = 8.86$, $p < .01$, $\omega^2 = .01$].

Correlations between appeal and sexism scale ratings are reported in Table 2. For both target ($r = -0.48$) and control ($r = -0.40$) ads these correlations were negative, as expected, indicating that, in general, ads rated high on the sexism scale received low appeal ratings, while ads rated low on the sexism scale received higher appeal ratings. Furthermore, these relationships held for both male and female subjects. However, these correlations were far from perfect, accounting for approximately 20% of the shared variance in the appeal and sexism ratings.

Table 2 about here

AWS Scale

On the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS), females (Mean = 1.89, SD = 0.46) displayed more liberal attitudes toward women than did males (Mean = 2.24, SD = 0.57) [$F(1,135) = 15.79$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .10$]. AWS scores were restricted in range (Mean = 2.03, SD = 0.53): although a 5-point rating scale was used on the AWS, the highest score for a male subject was 3.60, and only one female subject scored above 2.72.

AWS scores were correlated with appeal and sexism scale ratings for target and control ads for both male and female subjects. These results are given in Table 3. AWS scores did not correlate with the

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Table 3 about here
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appeal or sexism ratings of control ads, but did correlate significantly with the ratings for target ads. For the appeal scale the correlation was positive, and for the sexism scale negative. The direction of these correlations were not surprising, although the magnitude of the relationships were quite modest.

The 12 highest and lowest scorers on the AWS for both males and females were selected for further analysis. ANOVAs were again conducted, and the results for subject gender and for the type of ad shown were essentially the same as those reported above for the entire sample. However, the manipulation of AWS scores was not significant, and entered into no significant interactions, for either the appeal scale or the sexism scale[1].

DISCUSSION

Both males and females found target ads to be much more sexist than control ads. The effect was very large, accounting for 72% of the variance in the sexism ratings ($\omega^2 = .72$), but not very surprising, and attests primarily to the effectiveness of the manipulation of the type of advertisement shown to the subjects. It might be noted that, in contrast to these results, Stemple and Tyler (1974) found that college women, while aware that advertising is traditionally sexist, do not always evaluate sexist ads as such. Their sample was small ($N = 30$), however, and their data was collected nearly 10 years ago. Thus, the results reported here are likely to be more reliable.

More interesting than the main effect for the type of ad are the effects for subject gender and for the interaction on the sexism scale. These results indicated that, although males found target ads to be quite sexist, they nevertheless rated target ads as significantly less sexist than did females. These effects were rather small, however, accounting for a total of about 4% of the variance in rated sexism, qualifying as a small-to-medium sized effect according to Cohen's (1977; Welkowitz, Ewen, & Cohen, 1982) scaling of effect sizes[2]. (Although not intended as an apology for a small effect size, we might point out that when one variable in a design accounts for a great deal of variance, the remaining variables cannot account for very much. On the other hand, when only target ads are included in the analysis, the effect of sex still accounts for only about 10% of the total variance in rated sexism.) These results may have been due to a heightened

consciousness among our male introductory psychology students, but more likely were due to the operation of a social desirability factor. At the very least, our subjects were able to distinguish clearly between target and control ads when required to do so.

Significant effects on the appeal scale were quite large, accounting for a total of 36% of the variance in rated appeal. Males and females did not differ in rating the appeal of control ads. Similarly, males' ratings of target ad appeal were not significantly lower than were their ratings of control ad appeal. However, females rated target ads as less appealing than control ads, and also gave target ads lower appeal ratings than did male subjects. Males' appeal ratings of target ads were more favorable than ratings given by females, and were essentially the same as the appeal of control ads to both sexes. If males seemed to perceive target ads as sexist, as is apparent from the sexism scale results, then such perceptions seemed to matter less to them with respect to an ad's appeal than to females.

Ratings on the appeal scale were probably less influenced by social desirability, since appeal ratings for all subjects were obtained <u>prior</u> to the more "obvious" sexism scale ratings. In fact, the administration of the appeal and sexism rating scales was not counterbalanced precisely in anticipation of social desirability problems. To be certain, however, the role of social desirability should be investigated in future research.

AWS results were restricted in range, and therefore somewhat equivocal. Females displayed more liberal attitudes toward women than did males, and despite the restriction in range, this effect

accounted for 10% of the variance in AWS scores, a medium-large sized effect. Relationships between AWS scores and rated appeal and sexism of target ads were also modest. For both males and females, more traditional attitudes toward women were generally associated with greater appeal ratings for target ads. Similarly, more traditional attitudes were associated with lower sexism ratings for target ads (see Table 3).

These results were consistent with our intuitive notions of how subjects would rate the ads, although the relationships were not, as we had expected, stronger for males than for females. Furthermore, the magnitude of the effects were also moderate.

The restriction in range of the AWS scores undoubtedly played a role in attenuating these correlations, and we suspect that a social desirability factor might account for the restriction in range. Results of a recent study by Goldberg, Katz, and Rappeport (1979) also suggest that the AWS is contaminated by social desirability. They found that "liberal" scores on the AWS did not correlate with a behavioral measure of commitment to the feminist movement. It may be that the AWS is not a subtle enough instrument to assess as emotionally-laden and political an issue as attitudes toward women. Preliminary results of a principal components analysis of the AWS suggest that the scale may also have psychometric problems (Rossi & Rossi, 1982). These factors might account for the modest relationships between AWS scores and rated appeal and sexism of target ads.

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FOOTNOTES

Portions of this paper were presented at the 52nd annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York, April, 1981. Correspondence should be addressed to the second author at the Department of Psychology, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881.

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[1]It should be noted here that, given the magnitude of the effects under investigation, the power of these ANOVAs was quite low, probably not more than 0.50.

[2]Cohen (1977) has defined effect sizes for social research (i.e., research conducted outside the laboratory) in terms of the proportion of variance in the dependent variable which can be accounted for by the manipulation of the independent variable, as follows: small effect = 1%; medium effect = 6%; large effect = 14%.

Table 1

Appeal and Sexism Ratings for Control and Target Ads

		Appeal Scale		Sexism Scale	
		Control	Target	Control	Target
Males	Mean	3.24	3.06	1.82	3.70
(N=55)	SD	0.52	0.56	0.65	0.72
Females	Mean	3.44	2.34	1.84	4.07
(N=82)	SD	0.64	0.59	0.65	0.45
Total	Mean	3.36	2.63	1.83	3.92
(N=137)	SD	0.60	0.68	0.65	0.60

Note. Higher scores on the appeal scale indicate greater ad appeal. Higher scores on the sexism scale indicate greater perceived ad sexism.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix for Appeal and Sexism

Ratings of Control and Target Ads

Rating Scale	Ad Type	Appeal		Sexism	
		Control	Target	Control	Target
		Males (N = 55)			
Appeal	Control	1.00	0.15	-0.49***	-0.14
	Target		1.00	-0.21	-0.39**
Sexism	Control			1.00	0.57***
	Target				1.00
		Females (N = 82)			
Appeal	Control	1.00	0.38***	-0.37***	-0.13
	Target		1.00	-0.19	-0.42***
Sexism	Control			1.00	0.26*
	Target				1.00
		Total (N = 137)			
Appeal	Control	1.00	0.17*	-0.40***	-0.07
	Target		1.00	-0.18*	-0.48***
Sexism	Control			1.00	0.39***
	Target				1.00

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 3

AWS Correlations with Appeal and Sexism

Ratings for Control and Target Ads

Rating Scale	Ad Type	Subject Sample: Males	Females	Total
Appeal	Control	0.10	0.20	0.10
	Target	0.31*	0.24*	0.39**
Sexism	Control	-0.16	-0.11	-0.13
	Target	-0.27*	-0.24*	-0.33**
	N =	55	82	137

*p < .05

**p < .001